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# Widening Gender Norms with Literature

Teaching Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* and Gender in a  
Sociocultural Language Classroom

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## **Abstract**

**Title:** *Widening Gender Norms with Literature: Teaching Neil Gaiman's Neverwhere and Gender in a Sociocultural Language Classroom*

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**Abstract:** The aim of the essay is to argue why and how the novel *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman can be used to introduce students to gender issues in an English as a foreign language classroom where sociocultural theory is applied. By using authentic literature in the language classroom students can gain insight into social structures as well as develop their four language skills in different pre-, post-, and while reading tasks. A discourse analysis of the novel's characters using poststructural feminist theory and John Stephens's schema of masculine and feminine gender traits in literature shows that the characters do not conform entirely to either masculine or feminine gender traits. The analysis also shows gendering as a result of masculinity as norm. These results can be used to teach students that there are numerous ways to be male or female and for them to discuss gender performativity as well as the norms and structures behind gendering. By teaching *Neverwhere* and gender school can be a social arena where gender not only is constructed, but also deconstructed and gender norms widened with the use of literature.

**Keywords:** Literature, Sociocultural Theory, Poststructural Feminist Theory, Gender, Masculinity as Norm, *Neverwhere*, Neil Gaiman

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## Introduction

The social construction of gender, gender roles and stereotypes as well as the unequal conditions for women and men in society are topics that have been present in the public debate in Sweden for quite some time. Despite this, there is still some serious change needed to obtain equality between the sexes. For this change to take place, an awareness of the norms and power relations at work behind the different roles of men and women is needed. Therefore it is important to raise awareness of these social structures in all classrooms in upper secondary school, and to integrate a discussion of them in the teaching of specific subjects.

That this kind of awareness of social structures, such as gender, should be part of the everyday practice of the teacher and of all subjects is explicitly stated in the curriculum for Swedish upper secondary school. Values that a teacher should convey and implement in his/her future teaching, regardless of what subject s/he teaches, are “[t]he inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity between people” (Skolverket 4). This is a task that can feel daunting and difficult to put into practice, but as an English teacher I have the opportunity to use literature in my teaching, and as will be explored further in this introduction, literature can be a way to gain insight into social structures (Brumfit and Carter 25). Based on the view of literature as a pedagogical tool that Brumfit and Carter amongst others hold, I will in this essay look at how and why one specific literary work, the novel *Neverwhere*, can be used by a teacher in upper secondary school to teach gender issues.

*Neverwhere* is the second novel of the British author Neil Gaiman, it can be placed in the genre of urban fiction, but can also be seen as a modern fairy tale. There is not much critical work on Gaiman’s work based on feminist theory, but some analysis has been done on his comics and short stories. Even if much of Gaiman’s work is from a male perspective, and does not always represent women in an unproblematic manner, one thing his female characters have in common is a strong element of will and agency (Prescott and Drucker 1-5).

As will be discussed in more depth throughout this essay, *Neverwhere* contains elements that should make it appealing to a large number of Swedish students of English, as well as make it a suitable choice for discussions of gender and critical reflections on gender norms. The purpose of this kind of activity is to encourage students to develop critical thinking in relation to literature and social constructions, as well as enable them to make informed choices and widen the norms for gender identities.

The aim of this essay is to explore *how and why* *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman can be used to introduce gender issues in the language classroom. To do this, I will use Judith Butler's definition of gender, John Stephens's schema of masculine and feminine gender traits in literature as well as the pedagogical practice of sociocultural theory.

In chapter one of this essay I will discuss the benefits of using authentic literature in an English as a Foreign Language Classroom as well as address some of the problems involved in making all students read the same text. The novel *Neverwhere* will be discussed in terms of its strengths and weaknesses in a pedagogical context. Chapter two is a theoretical outline, where I will introduce key concepts of sociocultural and poststructural feminist theories. In chapter three I will conduct a literary analysis of the novel, and show how this can be used to introduce gender issues in the language classroom. The final chapter is a conclusion of the results of this essay.

# **1. Teaching *Neverwhere* in an English as a Foreign Language Classroom**

In this chapter the benefits of using authentic literature in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom where a sociocultural perspective is applied will be discussed and the problems in making all the students read the same novel will be addressed. Finally the novel *Neverwhere* will be introduced and discussed in terms of its strengths and weaknesses in a pedagogical context.

## *1.1 Why Use Authentic Literature in the EFL Classroom?*

Good reading skills in English are more important today than ever before. To be able to take part in the digital society where a lot of computer programs and information on the internet are in English, as well as to be successful in higher education and numerous professions, a good reading ability in English is required. Students need to be able to read different kinds of texts in different ways, fiction being one of the text types the language learner needs to be familiar with in order to be successful in the target language (Lundahl 10-11).

In the Swedish national curriculum for upper secondary school it is stated that “it is the responsibility of the school that all individual students [...] can use non-fiction, fiction and other forms of culture as a source of knowledge, insight and pleasure” (Skolverket 8). Further, the syllabus for the English 6 course in upper secondary school recommends that fiction, both contemporary and from earlier periods, should be used in the course (Skolverket 61). This makes the use of literature non-optional for English teachers within the Swedish school system. However, it is not stated in the curriculum or syllabus if the literature should be authentic, or if it can be texts written or modified for the purpose of language learning and teaching.

*Authentic literature* is defined as literature that is not written with the purpose of being used in teaching languages (Collie and Slater 3). Using authentic literature in an EFL classroom where the sociocultural perspective is applied to learning and teaching is valuable for a number of reasons. It can be a good material to base classroom interaction on since it provides authenticity and the opportunity for learners to express and discuss their own opinions. This in turn means that co-operative work in the classroom, for example pair and group work, can be used to a greater extent (Gilroy and Parkinson 215). This kind of interaction should be the basis for a sociocultural classroom since the social group is seen as the starting point for learning in sociocultural theory (Dysthe 8).

Authentic literature can provide the reader with insights into structures that create a society as well as a lot of cultural information, which enables the teacher to use authentic activities

(Brumfit and Carter 25; Collie and Slater 4). *Authentic activities* can be defined either as a school environment that as far as possible reflects structures in the world outside of school, or as the goal to educate learners in strategies of thinking and problem solving that will be useful outside of school. By learning these skills students will be able to keep on learning throughout life (Dysthe 43).

In addition, reading and working with authentic literature is also a useful tool for the language learner to develop more concrete skills. Reading authentic literature, depending on how the pre- and post- reading tasks are structured, can be a tool for developing all four of the learner's language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening (Gilroy and Parkinson 219-220). Literature can be useful in working with the structuring of the learner's own writing, expanding vocabulary, deducing meaning from context and developing an understanding of different styles of language and genres (Collin and Slater 3-6).

Finally, the meaning of literature is not static; it can vary in different contexts, and therefore can be found meaningful in various ways by various students in their various contexts (Collin and Slater 3). The sense of meaning in turn motivates students in their learning process (Dysthe 39).

### *1.2 Problems with Choosing one Literary Text for Classroom Activities*

There are also problems that need to be addressed before choosing one authentic literary text to work with in the classroom. To make everyone in a language class read the same literary work may not seem to meet the criteria for sociocultural praxis, since all the students will have different social and cultural backgrounds, as well as different levels of pre-knowledge of the text content and the target language. Because of this, the literary text may not be suitable for every individual learner in respect to the proximal zone of development<sup>1</sup>, and it could be seen as more beneficial for the students to individually choose what literary text to read (Lundahl 78). This is a valid point, but there are also advantages to using the same text with all the students in a group. The teacher has the possibility to make them curious about the text and familiar with its themes and context before starting reading it. It also enables the teacher to support the students in difficulties they may have and help them along the reading process, something that is difficult to do if all of them are reading different texts (Lundahl 78).

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<sup>1</sup> Skills a learner has not yet acquired, but is able to execute with help from someone with more knowledge in the field, for example a teacher or another student. Eventually the learner will be able to perform these skills singlehandedly (Dysthe 81).

Another aspect of choosing one literary text for students to read is that the teacher is making a value judgement. The teacher's taste moderates the choice, and also conveys the message that the chosen work is "better" than other texts (Brumfit and Carter 16). According to Brumfit and Carter (17) this is inevitable; teachers' opinions, as well as their social and cultural background will affect their choice of literature. Brumfit and Carter (18) also argue that it does not need to be a problem, as long as teachers are aware that their literature choices can never be objective or value free. Applying sociocultural theory to teaching, and being aware that their own context as well as the students' will impact on how the literary text is perceived, teachers can help students develop their own literary competence. In this way classroom teaching can address the issue of value judgements connected to choosing literary texts.

### 1.3 *Why Teach* Neverwhere?

It is important that a literary text used for classroom activities has elements that the learners experience as relevant to their personal needs, and that for example the events or characters in the text are such that can be discussed in relation to these (Brumfit and Carter 33). There are also studies that have shown that students in Swedish upper secondary school prefer to read more adult texts that deal with social issues, an aspect that is important for the teacher to take in to consideration when choosing a text for students in a Swedish school (Lundahl 79).

*Neverwhere* meets many of the criteria Lundahl (83) lists that teachers should take into consideration when choosing an authentic text for classroom activities. It has an interesting and thrilling story suitable for both adults and older teenagers, and even though it can be placed in the genre of urban fantasy it deals with themes and social issues that most learners will be able to relate to. The story exists in numerous media forms, Neil Gaiman originally wrote *Neverwhere* as a television series for the BBC that aired in 1996 and made a novelization of the story the same year. In addition to the novel and the television series it has been turned into a comic book and a stage play. The novel contains many elements found in fairy tales, such as a quest, talking animals and other kinds of magic; therefore many readers will be familiar with the structure. The story is written in a linear manner, and contains a lot of dialogue, factors that make a text more readable for students (Lundahl 78).

The novel's many themes make it a useful aid in teaching. Some of the themes that can be found are trust and distrust, selfishness, compassion and homelessness ([www.neilgaiman.com](http://www.neilgaiman.com) 25-02-13). What makes it especially interesting in my view, is the existence of the London Below, a warped reflection of London, where there seems to be no



expectations about how to behave. Both female and male characters pursue their own interests and there is one sexless character in the novel, something that I think can be a good starting point for a discussion of gender roles and gender stereotypes.

## 2. Theory

In this chapter the theories used for analysing and discussing the use of *Neverwhere* in the language classroom to illustrate gender will be introduced. Key concepts of the sociocultural theory and post structural feminist theory will also be explained.

### 2.1 Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory is based on the idea that the foundation and starting point of learning is the social group that the individual learner is part of (Dysthe 8). According to Dysthe (10) language is the single most important tool for learning and mediation of knowledge, since it brings individual and social processes together.

*Knowledge* is viewed as pragmatic, it is constructed by humans when they co-operate in practical activities within a mutual cultural context. In addition knowledge and language are intertwined in a historical and cultural context (Dysthe 34). That knowledge is part of a context and social cohesion means that it cannot be learnt isolated from the context. The context in which someone learns therefore affects what is learnt (Dysthe 42).

*The zone of proximal development* is a key concept in sociocultural theory. It refers to skills a learner has not yet acquired, but is able to execute with help from someone with more knowledge in the field, e.g. a teacher or another student. The functions that are situated within a learner's zone of proximal development, those the learner can do with the help of others, s/he will be able to perform singlehandedly later on. The function of the individual that assists and challenges the learner in the zone of proximal development is called *scaffolding* (Dysthe 81-82).

According to the sociocultural perspective, the motivation for learning is the experience of meaning. The learner has to evaluate information, learning and knowledge as relevant and meaningful to the context s/he is part of to be motivated in the learning process (Dysthe 39). The individual learner is part of numerous discourses, therefore an important task of the education system, from a sociocultural point of view, is to provide learners with tools such as concepts and ways of thinking that enable them to take part and function in various contexts (Dysthe 44).

In sociocultural theory reading is viewed as an interactive process, it is a form of dialogue between the reader and the text. Reading requires that numerous kinds of knowledge are used and applied to the text, the dialogue being the combining of pre-knowledge and the information gained from the text. It is important that the teacher is aware of what happens in

this process, and uses it as a stepping stone when designing tasks and setting goals for the reading activities (Hegde 188-189, 194). Lundahl (30, 35) argues that the content of a text always should be in focus in a language classroom. In addition, the group of students, the content of the text and the context should be determining factors for how the teacher chooses and structures the classroom activities.

## *2.2 Poststructural Feminist Theory*

Poststructural feminist draws on several other theories and fields of studies, such as psychoanalytical theory, feminist theory, lesbian and gay studies as well as queer theory. One of the main theorists within the tradition is Judith Butler (Jagger 1). In this essay I will use her definitions of some of the key concepts in the theory.

The division of people based on biological sex is problematized by Butler; this division is seen as a social construction, as is *gender*, one of the key concepts in the theory. *Gender* is described as a “kind of enforced cultural performance, compelled by compulsory heterosexuality, and that, as such, it is performative. Rather than expressing some inner core of pre-given identity, the performance of gender produces the *illusion* of such core essence” (Jagger 21). Butler views heterosexuality as a power/knowledge regime and as a hegemonic structure in society. The social performance of gender, such as gestures and body movements, is in keeping with the norms that the hegemonic discourse of heterosexuality constitutes. Gender performance is therefore not a product of the individual’s inner nature, but regulated by social and political approval (Jagger 26-27).

In poststructural feminist theory there is a distinction between the two concepts of *performance* and *performativity*. *Performance* creates the illusion that there is a pre-existing self behind gender actions, which implies that a true self exists and that there is a core identity that those of one biological sex have in common. *Performativity* on the other hand refers to Butler’s view of gender, where the self of the performer is created both in and by the act. Identity and gender are therefore not natural acts, but products of performativity which creates gender through its repetition. Gender has gained its status as “natural” by repetition throughout history, and is at the same time both an individual action and a public one (Butler 525-526, Jagger 22-23).

This theory of gender implies that school is one of the social arenas where performativity acts are carried out and gender maintained as a “natural” order. According to the curriculum, schools should work for equality between the sexes (Skolverket 4). To achieve this I think it is important to put the focus onto the processes behind this division into male/female;

masculine/feminine that many take for granted, problematize them and create an awareness as well as a discussion where students can draw from both their own experience and insights gained from authentic literature.

### *2.3 Masculinity and Femininity in Literature*

Butler's theory can be difficult to grasp and has been criticised because of its sometimes rather unclear definitions of concepts (Jagger 7). To make the idea of gender performativity more accessible to upper secondary students I believe that the use of John Stephens's schema for analysing masculine and feminine gender traits in literature can be helpful. In line with sociocultural theory Stephens emphasises the importance of both the contexts of the author and the readers in the construction of and attitudes towards gender (Stephens 17).

The schema is a binary division of masculinity and femininity, where they are seen as both opposites and as having an interrelationship. Stereotypical *masculine gender traits* are characterised by activity, independence and lack of emotion, whereas the stereotypical *feminine gender traits* are characterised by passiveness, dependence and emotionalism. The attributes seen as masculine tend to be valued as superior to those viewed as feminine (Stephens 18-19). This is a consequence of the *hegemonic masculinity* in society, which means that a certain kind of masculinity is the dominant norm and other kinds of masculinity as well as different kinds of femininity are subordinate to that norm (Holm 36). Most masculinities within this hierarchic division are positioned above femininities, masculinity and male are the social norm and femininity and female are deviating from this norm (Paechter 7). As a result of *masculinity as norm*, there is commonly the assumption that someone/something is male or masculine if not the opposite, that it is female or feminine, is stated. Male and the masculine are in a sense used as neutrals, something that is reflected in the English language (Paechter 5).

Stephens's schema will provide students with a basis for analysing and discussing the portrayal of the characters in *Neverwhere*. Even if the schema's binary division makes it problematic from a poststructural feminist point of view, it can be used to highlight gender norms and as a starting point for a discussion of *performativity*.

### 3. Analysis

In this chapter ways of working with *Neverwhere* in an EFL classroom where sociocultural theory is applied will be suggested and discussed in relation to the national curriculum for the Swedish upper secondary school. Passages and sections of the novel that are suitable to discuss gender will be pointed out and explored in relation to Butler's theory as well as Stephens's schema for gender traits.

I will start by introducing a general lesson plan for teaching *Neverwhere* and gender in an EFL classroom in section 3.1. In section 3.2 I will argue why *Neverwhere* is a suitable tool to discuss gender from a poststructural feminist point of view. Thereafter, in section 3.3 I will conduct a literary analysis of the novel in relation to two themes and suggest how this can be used to discuss gender issues in a sociocultural language classroom. Finally, in chapter 3.4 I will briefly discuss potential problems that can arise when teaching the themes.

#### 3.1 A General Lesson Plan for Teaching *Neverwhere*

The curriculum for the Swedish upper secondary school states that "the school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise. No one in school should be subject to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment, or to other forms of degrading treatment." (Skolverket 4). It is also stated in the curriculum that knowledge and open discussion are important tools in preventing discrimination (Skolverket 4). One of the main goals with the lesson plan presented in this section is therefore for the students to reflect upon and discuss the concept of gender. *Neverwhere* is a tool that enables them to empathise with different characters and hopefully, through classroom discussions and work tasks designed for a deeper understanding of the novel and the performativity of gender, promote critical thinking, awareness of social constructions and behaviour that is non-discriminating.

To focus on gender is one of the main goals with the lesson plan, another is to meet the general goals of the Swedish syllabus for English, namely for the students to develop their language knowledge and ability to use English in different situations and for different purposes (Skolverket 53). This will be done by working with the four language skills: writing, reading, speaking and listening in tasks throughout the project (Gilroy and Parkinson 219-220).

Teaching a novel of the length of *Neverwhere* will require a significant amount of classroom time. The text is almost 400 pages long and to capture the students' interest and to

get them motivated for the task ahead, an introduction of the story, its setting and some of its themes will be necessary before starting the actual reading process.

In sociocultural theory the importance of taking the learners pre-knowledge into account in any teaching situations is emphasised. Therefore introductory work to the novel could be done with the class divided into small groups, where the students get the opportunity to share their experience and knowledge (Dysthe 34). Topics to be discussed in these groups, to make students familiar with the context of the novel, are what expectations they as readers have on a fairy tale, what kind of characters they expect to find, as well as their pre-knowledge of London and famous sights in the city. These discussions would give the teacher an insight into the students' schematic knowledge of fairy tales, and most likely a hint of what gender expectations they have on its characters (Stephens 17). The group work would preferably be followed by some teacher led classroom time, where the discussions are summed up in class, and *Neverwhere* and the author Neil Gaiman more thoroughly introduced.

After this is done, as suggested by Collie and Slater (11-15), a suitable way of working with the novel would be to ask students to do the main part of the reading at home, and then work with passages or sections of it in class. The sections chosen should offer a base for working with various kinds of activities, which in addition, provide opportunities to focus on gender in relation to the students' own experience and pre-knowledge. Keeping the small groups students were divided into during the introduction for further classroom discussions will create a learning situation where they can learn from each other, help each other develop learning strategies and function as each other's scaffolding (Dysthe 39, 81-82).

To support the students in their home reading, they would be supplied with worksheets, which would receive a different amount of follow-up in class. The worksheets would be designed in a way that draws the students' attention to the description, behaviour and actions of the characters. This will provide them with a base that can be used to reflect upon gender. The worksheets would also focus on vocabulary and grammar and on deepening the students' understanding of the novel (Collie and Slater 36-51).

When the process of reading the novel is finished, there are numerous ways of working with it in different post-reading tasks (Collie and Slater 79). These tasks can create good opportunities for students to share their experiences of the story, and discuss the story in more general terms, but could also provide opportunity for students to reflect more thoroughly upon concepts and issues discussed in class (Lundahl 187).

### 3.2 Poststructural Feminism and *Neverwhere*

The main purpose of this essay is to show that *Neverwhere* is a suitable tool for discussing gender issues in an EFL classroom. In Gaiman's linear story telling the reader gets to know the characters better throughout the novel, and a deeper understanding of their characteristics is developed in relation to their actions. The narrator in the novel is omniscient, but gives little, if any, direct information about the characters' personality traits; they are something readers have to make out for themselves based on behaviour, feelings and the dialogue between characters.

These factors make it suitable for a poststructural feminist analysis of gender, since this way of portraying the characters makes the concept of performativity clear. The repletion of acts and behaviour make the reader identify certain characteristics as part of the characters' identities and gender. By using *Neverwhere* in the classroom, it is possible to have a common basis for discussions of how the characters' actions affect the interpretation of their gender and characteristics, as well as what it is in these acts that makes the reader perceive the characters as either masculine or feminine (Stephens 18-19). The gender traits found in the novel can then be explored further in relation to the students' context and everyday life (Dysthe 44).

### 3.3 Themes for Literary Analysis and Classroom Work

In this section, I will explore two different themes in *Neverwhere*. The two themes will be analysed using a combination of poststructural feminist theory and Stephens's schema of masculinity and femininity in literature. I will also show how they can be used to discuss gender issues in a sociocultural language classroom, and why this is relevant according to the steering documents of Swedish upper secondary school.

#### 3.3.1 Performativity of Gender in *Neverwhere*

The reader of *Neverwhere* is introduced to numerous characters throughout the novel; some of them part of London Above (for example Richard and Jessica), and others of London Below (for example Door, Hunter and the Marquis de Carabas). According to Gaiman most of the characters in the novel are common stock characters, but intended to be twisted versions of them. Richard is the "everyman hero", whereas Door is "the Princess in Peril", Hunter the "Kick-Ass Female Warrior" and Jessica the "Dreadful Fiancée" ([www.neilgaiman.com](http://www.neilgaiman.com) 18-04-13). Applying Stephens's (18-19) schema of gender traits to the actions and descriptions of

these characters, it becomes clear that the twist, or at least one of the twists, is that they transcend conventional gender boundaries in literature.

Despite being “the princess in peril”, Door is a leader, brave, smart and powerful. The other characters in the quest group function as her helpers, but Door has actively hired them and is the one in charge of the quest. She hires Hunter to take care of and protect her, but at the same time Door takes care of and protects Richard. Not only does her behaviour combine both the masculine and feminine traits in Stephens’s schema (18-19). In addition, her looks are described as androgynous by Richard, reminding him of “a beautiful homeless child he had seen, the previous winter, behind Covent Garden: he had not been certain whether it was a girl or a boy” (Gaiman 146). Door’s acts, behaviour and looks imply that the binary division of gender is problematic and also contradict what Stephens (19) suggests, that characters that break the gender schemas are unlikeable and even lack credibility. Door is one of the good characters in the novel that the reader empathises with and supports and she does not come across as an unrealistic woman.

Another important female character in the novel is Hunter. She is known as the best bodyguard in London Below, but has not been seen or heard from in a long time before auditioning to be Door’s bodyguard. Where Door wants to go, Hunter safely leads the group, fighting and defeating men twice her size and beasts of the underside as they go along. That she is her name, a hunter, is expressed in the following passage,

‘I fought in the sewers beneath New York with the great blind white alligator-king. He was thirty feet long, fat from sewage and fierce in battle. And I bested him and I killed him’ [...] ‘I fought the bear that stalked the city beneath Berlin. He had killed a thousand men, and his claws were stained brown and black from the dried blood of a hundred years, but he fell to me’ [...] ‘There was a black tiger in the undercity of Calcutta. A man-eater, brilliant and bitter, the size of a small elephant. A tiger is a worthy adversary. I took him with my bare hands’ (Gaiman 228).

According to Stephens (18-19) being a hunter is a stereotypical masculine gender trait, but in *Neverwhere* the best hunter of the underworld is a woman. It becomes clear that Hunter is strong, violent and powerful. To kill a beast known to have eaten several men, she did not even need a weapon, only her bare hands. But she also displays a side that is caring and nurturing towards Door. Similar to Door, Hunter has characteristics that are a combination of both the masculine and feminine gender traits in Stephens’s (18-19) schema. It is indicated that Hunter is homosexual and her skin colour is described as having the colour of burnt caramel (Gaiman 101,219). This means that one of the most well respected and empowered persons in London Below, is someone who has characteristics that in western society usually are associated with otherness and alienation. However, it is at the same time possible that the



portrayal of Hunter reinforces other stereotypes, for example that of the masculine lesbian woman. When teaching the novel, it is important that the teacher addresses and problematizes this stereotype to avoid reinforcement of it amongst the students.

The combination of feminine and masculine gender traits is not only found in the female characters of the novel. Richard, the main character and hero of the story starts out as passive and obedient in relation to all the other characters he interacts with, for example his girlfriend Jessica, Door, the Marquis de Carabas and Hunter. Even if he is compassionate and caring, most of the time the other characters have to take care of him and protect him from danger. He is also the character in the novel that displays the most emotion. At one point Richard is described as “feeling like a small and ineffectual dog yapping at the heels of a postman” (Gaiman 35). This indicates his lack of power as well as his vulnerability. But as the story and the quest progress, so does Richard. With the help of Hunter’s instructions he ends up killing the beast of London Below, something that would not have been likely for him to do in the beginning of the novel. After the group has finished their quest and Richard returns to London Above, he is empowered.

The old Richard, the one who had lived in what was now the Buchanans’ home, would have crumbled at this point, apologized for being a nuisance and gone away. Instead Richard said ‘Really? Nothing you can do about it? You let out a property I was legally renting from your company to someone else, and in the process lost all my personal possessions, and there is nothing you can do about it? Now, I happen to think, and I’m sure my lawyer will also think, that there is a great deal you can do about it.’ (Gaiman 358-359).

Here, the transformation in Richard’s actions is clear, from being a victim and dependent on others, he stands up for himself and becomes independent and tough. From complying with the traditional feminine gender traits in literature he, in some of the schema’s aspects, transcends into traditionally masculine traits (Stephens 18-19). That this kind of transgression is possible clearly shows that gender is constructed in and by the actions. If gender would have been a question of a biological essence rather than performativity, the kind of change that is portrayed by Gaiman in Richard would not have been possible or believable.

All the characters analysed above show the problems poststructural feminism discusses in the binary division of gender and in particular with this division in Stephens’s gender traits schema. In London Below, there seems to be less expectation on how people can or should behave based on their biological sex compared to the Western World. Characters in the novel to a large extent combine feminine and masculine gender traits in Stephens’s schema (18-19). This shows that it is possible to be a woman or a man in numerous ways, and that it is possible to choose which way you want to create your identity, since performativity makes

gender a process that is various and continuous (Dale Parker 162-167). It also shows that a person, regardless of biological sex, can act in a way that is active, passive, independent, dependent, unemotional or emotional. These acts have been classified by social and political structures as either masculine or feminine, and defined as “belonging” to one of the two biological sexes male or female (Jagger 26-27). The characters in *Neverwhere* demonstrate that they actually are human traits that can be found in both biological sexes.

The theme of gender performativity could be worked with in numerous ways in the classroom. My suggestion is that the topic of gender, masculine and feminine is brought up early on in the reading project and then kept in focus throughout. The teacher can start by introducing the concepts of gender in class and give students some time to think of what kind of behaviour and looks they associate with the words masculine/feminine, male/female. Then students can have some time to discuss their thoughts in small groups, and finally these can be brought up in a teacher led discussion in class. The class discussion can be performed using the board; the teacher puts two columns on the board, one for masculine and one for feminine, and then asks a member from each group to write the things they have come up with in their group discussions under each column. After this is done, the teacher can hand out Stephens’s schema to the students, and together in class compare this to what the students have put up on the board.

When the comparison is finished, students can once again discuss in their groups, questions for discussions can be whether students think that there are individuals who fit entirely under one of the columns, or if most people fit under both in some aspects, as well as if it is more socially accepted for a female to fit under the masculine column or for a male to fit under the feminine one, and in that case, why it is like that. Once again these discussions can be summed up in class by the teacher.

These kinds of exercises would give students an opportunity to discuss gender in a way that is relevant to their own experience, as well as deal with a social issue (Brumfit and Carter 33, Lundahl 79). In addition it activates the students’ pre-knowledge of the concepts of masculine and feminine, something that will be useful in further interaction with the novel (Hedge 188-189).

In accordance with Collie and Slater’s (36-51) suggestions students can preferably be provided with worksheets to support them in their reading. These worksheets should, among other things, contain questions that draw their attention to how some of the characters are depicted and to their behaviour. Students should be asked to write down their answers to the questions. These questions and answers could get different amounts of follow up in class as

the reading project moves forward, but what I suggest is that these are also used when students have finished reading the novel, to once again discuss gender, in a similar fashion as described above.

The two columns of gender traits created by the students during an earlier lesson and Stephens's schema can be brought up again, but now the students will be asked to discuss the characters of the novel in relation to these divisions of feminine and masculine. This can be done in two ways, either all the groups can discuss all the characters of interest, or each group of students can discuss one of the characters in relation to the list of gender traits. Which way it is done can be decided by the students. Using their answers to the worksheet questions as a basis for discussion, students will be asked to discuss which of the words and descriptions in the two columns created earlier they would say correspond to the novel's characters.

Summing up these discussions in class, the desired outcome is that students will notice that the characters to a large extent fit into both the columns of gender traits. This outcome will enable discussions of what gender actually is, if it is something that we are born with, or if it is something that is created through our actions. The students' observations could then be used to show that it is possible to be male and female in numerous ways and that it would be preferable to remove the dividing line between the columns of feminine and masculine, that was made during an earlier class, and change the headings from masculine and feminine traits, to just human traits (Dale Parker 162-167).

This task design makes use of all the four language skills: students need to read the novel and the worksheets, write down their answers and both speak and listen during classroom discussions (Gilroy and Parkinson 219-220). The structure of the task also requires them to use their English for different purposes, namely to interact with a fictive text, interact with each other and argue for their beliefs. It therefore meets numerous requirements of the Swedish curriculum for upper secondary school (Skolverket 54).

The interactive classroom situation that is created in and by the group and class discussions is in line with the sociocultural perspective on learning. The students' knowledge of gender is developed in their own context and by co-operation (Dysthe 34). During the work with the theme of gender, the teacher functions as the students' scaffolding, by organising the classroom work and the reading of the novel, as well as being able to add to their discussions and help them develop their thoughts. By working in groups, the students can also support each other in the same way (Dysthe 81-82).

The theme also gives the opportunity for students to develop their knowledge of structures in the world around them and to have discussions on a topic that can be seen as both concrete

and abstract. The topic of gender is relevant to their school situation, future working life and interaction in society (Skolverket 61). Gender is an ever present aspect of the life of students, by bringing it into focus, the teacher can help and prepare students for taking part and functioning in various contexts (Dysthe 44). By discussing gender in class and the problems with restricting peoples' behaviour and looks to their sex and restricting people to being either masculine or feminine, the tasks hopefully "promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise" (Skolverket 4), as well as contribute to the prevention of discrimination based on gender and sex.

### 3.3.2 Masculinity as Norm

One of the characters in *Neverwhere* is the Angel Islington. Islington lives in London Below, and is throughout the story referred to as "it". Its looks are described as "its face was pale and wise, and gentle; and perhaps a little lonely [...] It had no wings; but still, it was unmistakably, an angel" (Gaiman 132-133). As well as having "golden hair and a pale face. It was not much taller than Richard, but it made him feel like a little child. It was not a man; it was not a woman. It was very beautiful" (Gaiman 197). Its beauty is in addition depicted as "perfectly androgynous" (Gaiman 259).

Despite this sexless, or at least something other than male or female, appearance of the angel, Richard has problems grasping that the angel is an "it", as well as that an angel can be a villain. After finding out that Islington is the one behind the murders of Door's family, Richard calls the angel a "he": "'I still don't understand' said Richard. 'I actually met him. It. Him. He's an angel. I mean, a real angel'" (Gaiman 306). Mr Croup, who together with Mr. Vandemar was employed by the angel to murder Door's family, addresses Islington as "sir", a masculine honorific, but when talking about the angel says "it" (Gaiman 258-259). Both Richard's and Mr Croup's utterances indicate to the reader that there is something about the angel that makes it more masculine than feminine.

By applying the poststructural feminist gender definition (Jagger 22-23), looking at the angel's behaviour and actions, and comparing them to Stephens's schema for gender traits (18-19), it is possible to see if the angel actually fits more in with the masculine schema than the feminine one. In Door's and Richard's first encounter with the angel, it is sharing, caring and displays emotion. However, in interaction with Mr Croup it is authoritarian and unemotional. On their second encounter, after the angel has captured Door, it still displays a manner of gentleness and caring towards Richard, but it is something that changes as their conversation moves forward, and it becomes aggressive, violent and tough. This indicates that

the acts of gentleness and compassion were just that, an act, to gain Richard's and Door's trust and for it to get what it wanted. "There was no longer any trace of kindness or compassion on the angel's face, only hatred, pure and honest and cold. 'I will kill you,' it told her" (Gaiman 332).

The Angel Islington fit in both the feminine and masculine schema of gender traits. However, it seems as if the stereotypical feminine behaviour is only a cunning deceit on the angel's part. The angel's behaviour in interaction with Mr Croup and Mr Vandemar throughout the novel, as well as with Richard and Door after its plan to escape its prison is revealed, are acts found the masculine schema of gender traits rather than the feminine one (Stephens 18-19). This can explain that Mr Croup addresses it as "sir" and that Richard thinks of the angel as a "he" after finding out that it is behind the murders of Door's family, since in London Above, where Richard comes from, violence is associated with masculinity. The fact that someone/something that is referred to as "it" still can be interpreted as being masculine clearly supports Butler's definition of gender performativity, Islington's behaviour can be said to create an illusion of a masculine core to its identity, but Islington being "sexless" means that there are no "natural" biological essences or reasons to its behaviour, rather, its identity is created in the act alone, but this identity is gendered by social conventions (Butler 525-526, Jagger 21).

However, that the angel is gendered as male by Richard can also be a result of that masculinity is the social norm. As mentioned, the angel displays behaviour that is both feminine and masculine, but it is not called a "she" when acting stereotypically feminine while a "he" when acting stereotypically masculine. As Paechter (9) argues, male is seen as sexually neutral since it is the norm. This implies that to Richard "it" and "he" can be used interchangeably since the neutral, "it", equals male in the society he comes from. As long as it is not clearly stated that someone, in this case the angel, is a woman it will be assumed that it is a man by the reader even though referred to as "it".

Classroom work on this theme of masculinity as norm to a large extent relates to the theme of gender performance in the novel and can be integrated in the classroom activities suggested earlier, but can also be treated as an independent unit. In my opinion it is preferable to work with the issues of gender performativity in relation to the other characters in the novel first and then deal with the Angel of Islington. This since students will have a better grasp of the distinction between male/masculine and female/feminine after this kind of work, something that will be useful when working with the sexless character.

When dealing with a novel in the classroom, it is important that the teacher provides a clear structured pattern. By organizing the classroom work of this second theme in a similar way as the first, students will be familiar with the structure and be able to feel confident and relaxed in the interaction with each other, both in group discussions and class discussions (Lundahl 140).

Once again the topic should be explored in relation to the students' pre-knowledge (Collie and Slater 16); therefore, before reaching the passage in the text where the angel Islington is introduced to the reader, the students could discuss their mental representations and knowledge about angels. One way of doing this could be to give the students some time to picture search the word "angel" on the internet and find an image that is the best representation of what they think an angel looks like. After this is done, students can compare their pictures in the same groups as they have been working in previously and discuss some questions provided by the teacher, such as if they think of an angel as male/female, masculine/feminine, what characteristics they think an angel has and so on. These discussions can then be brought up in class by the teacher, who can show one picture from each group and let students explain how the image represents angels to them. The teacher can also examine what is most common, an image of a male or a female angel. Lundahl (162) suggests that making a mind map can be a good way of summarising a discussion. Therefore, the discussions can be summarised in a mind map on the board, the mind map being a representation of what looks and behaviour the students associate with an angel.

When approaching the end of reading *Neverwhere*, a classroom task that focuses on how Islington is depicted in the novel can be conducted. Looking at descriptions and behaviour of the angel in different sections of the novel, students can discuss in groups what words they think describe the angel's behaviour. The students and the teacher can together make a new mind map on the board, this time based on the angel Islington's looks and behaviour. Students could be asked to discuss in their groups which gender schema they think the angel fits in, based on the mind map, as well as if their image of the angel changed after it was called "he" by Richard.

After the discussions, the teacher could show corresponding scenes from the *Neverwhere* television series with Islington, who is played by a male actor ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) 06-05-13). The fact that someone who is referred to as "it" is seen as male by Richard in the novel and played by a male actor in the television series can now be discussed in relation to masculinity as norm. Do the students think of the angel as "it" even though portrayed by a male actor? This is something that students can explore in relation to how other things that we do not

know the sex or gender of are referred to, for example the Christian god is commonly viewed as male, animals of unknown sex is usually called “he”, as are people referred to by their profession, e.g. doctors, lawyers and police officers. Students could discuss why they think that this is and if and how their view of the angel Islington would have changed if it was called “she” by Richard and played by a woman in the television series.

They could also discuss if they think it is possible to change this norm of masculinity in society, for example in Swedish the word “hen” can be used when referring to someone that the speaker does not know the biological sex of. Do students think that this open up for females and femininity to be part of the norm? By discussing this, the structure of the norm is made visible to students, and they can develop an awareness of it in relation to their everyday life, which is important for their motivation to learn about the concept (Dysthe 39).

In the curriculum for the Swedish upper secondary school it is stated that “the school should actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for women and men. Students should be encouraged to develop their interests without prejudice to gender differences” (Skolverket 5). By discussing masculinity as norm in the classroom, students can gain insight about the norm and the existence of a hierarchic division between masculinities and femininities, which is something that can hinder equality between the two biological sexes. Awareness, knowledge and open discussions are ways of dealing with intolerance and a tool for gaining understanding and compassion for others (Skolverket 4).

One possible post-reading task, which draws on both the theme of masculinity as norm and the first theme of gender performativity, could be to ask students to write an essay on gender issues. Topics for the essay could be to discuss if Islington can be said to have a gender, even while being an “it”, why or why not, which one and so on. They could also write about the portrayal of the different characters in the novel in relation to gender. For example, is there a difference in the portrayal of male and female characters, are they stereotypically gendered, what do they think this says about our society or about the reader, how does the characters’ behaviour relate to gender in the students’ own lives? This kind of task makes use of the students’ discussions of the novel’s characters and also provides them with the opportunity to write in a reflective manner. It is important that students get a sufficient amount of time for their writing and that they have access to the novel, their notes and worksheets during the writing process (Lundahl 186-187).

Lundahl (181) argues that it is important to include this kind of writing task in the EFL classroom; it not only cements the language and new concepts and words students have encountered in the reading and discussions. The writing also makes it possible for them to

clarify their thoughts and arguments, students get time to think more in depth about issues discussed in class and more quiet students get an opportunity to make their voices heard.

### *3.4 Potential Problems with Teaching the Themes*

As a teacher, it is important to be aware that when working with a discussion based structure in the classroom there is always the risk of students not participating in the discussions, that there will only be a few students that make their voices heard, that they only discuss the issues when the teacher is present, as well as that the language used for discussions is not that of English. However, the themes are such that relate to the students' own contexts and as argued in chapter one of this essay, *Neverwhere* is a novel that meets the criteria for texts that students usually find motivating to discuss. Also, even if the discussions may be tentative in the beginning, by practicing discussions throughout the work with the novel, students will get comfortable in the structure of the task and in their groups and be more active in the discussions as the reading moves along (Lundahl 83, 176).

Gender and masculinity as norm are subjects that potentially can be sensitive issues to discuss for teenagers, the teenage years being a time in life when most humans develop the identity they identify themselves with for the rest of their adult life, as well as it being a time when we are extra sensitive to what others may say or think about us. Students may come from backgrounds where the gender identities in the novel to be discussed are controversial and they may not agree with the view of gender that I am trying to convey in this essay and in the teaching of *Neverwhere*. Therefore, as Lundahl (179) argues, it is important that the atmosphere during discussions is one that enables everyone to express their opinion, without being met by disrespect or intolerance, but that also stresses the importance of expressing one's opinion in a manner that is not offensive or insulting to others.



## 4. Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to show how and why *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman can be used in a language classroom to introduce gender issues. School is an arena where gender and gender roles can be constructed, but through discussions and questioning of social norms, it can also be a place where gender is deconstructed and gender norms widened. In the curriculum for the Swedish upper secondary school it is stated that “the task of the school is to encourage all students to discover their own uniqueness as individuals” (Skolverket 4). It also states that no one should be subject to discriminating treatment due to their expression of gender identity and that students should be able to develop interests without being targets for prejudices based on gender differences (Skolverket 4-5).

The view of gender that is the basis for poststructural feminist theory can help students discover the individual uniqueness described in the curriculum as well as preventing that they are discriminated by other because of their expression of these unique identities. I therefore think it is suitable to apply post structural feminist theory to the reading and the discussions of *Neverwhere*, even if the view of gender the theory represents is not obvious to or even accepted by everyone. The analysis of the novel’s characters can be used to show students that it is possible to be female or male in numerous ways and that one’s identity does not have to be limited by the social construction that gender is. The novel also makes it possible to draw attention to the norm of masculinity in society and the fact that things we do not know the sex/gender of often are labelled as male/masculine due to this structure.

Authentic literature is a valuable resource in the EFL classroom that can create a common basis for classroom discussions not only of the text itself, but also of social, cultural and ethical aspects represented in the literary work (Collie and Slater 3-6). In the case of this essay the social and cultural aspects of gender and masculinity as norm. Students get the opportunity to take someone else’s perspective and relate it to their own context, as well as the opportunity to develop all the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening with the help of pre, post and while reading tasks (Brumfit and Carter 25). If the teacher organises classroom activities in a way that opens up for discussions, students can share their experiences and thoughts with each other, as well as support each other in the process of reading the novel and in the development of knowledge about gender issues.

Even if the students choose to keep with the existing norms discussed in the classroom, they will nevertheless be making an informed choice, instead of having a normative behaviour without reflecting about the structures behind it. By gaining awareness about social structures,

students will hopefully think twice about how and why they treat and react to others the way they do, as well as be able to treat others, who may or may not conform to stereotypically feminine or masculine behaviour, with openness and respect regardless of their sex and/or gender.

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